

Clockwork Universe

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 Dec 1998

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Alice Turner — 12 Dec 1998, 11:59

Re Jonathan's clockwork query:

The idea of the "mechanical (or clockwork) universe" dates back as far as the 14th c, but became really influential in the just pre-Enlightened late 17th, early 18thcs, with their enormous advances in optics and clock manufacture, and followed Gallileo's discoveries at the same time as Garden-of-Eden theory (what we now call fundamentalism wrt creation). Descartes was a big proponent, Spinoza a skeptic. In it, all phenomena are the result of matter set in motion according to natural laws set down by God. Note, natural as opposed to supernatural, which had been the prevailing view for all of recorded history to date. There were political Reformist ramifications: Protestant predestinationism favored it, obviously. But what doomed it was, first, the successive discoveries of just how huge and puzzling the universe really is, and second, the theory of evolution. I'm simplifying alarmingly, of course.

So Wolfe is playing with the idea of the Whorl really and truly being a mini-universe created down to the last iota not only by Typhon but by himself, Wolfe. If Silk is a clockwork figure up until the time of his theophany, that event precipitates him into the uncharted area of free will (Wolfe is a converted Catholic [Eliot, too], the most tenacious kind) or, though he is perhaps following the will of the Outsider, actions that he would never in the course of an ordered life consider. I think that might help to answer your question of how to reconcile the Outsider's position. He will not provide supernatural help, but he has put into play a potent form of natural help (Silk) that may yet fail--free will. There is also the writer's inside joke of, well, no matter how carefully he has built his universe and plotted his action---characters sometimes do have a will of their own. The theophany is at the very beginning of the series, after all.

-alga

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.